

Sermon for Palm Sunday, 2009
 Trinity Church
 Mark 11:1-11

Sometime in the early autumn of 1960, I was at a conference in Chicago. It was a presidential election year and John Kennedy was there for a campaign appearance. It was a big event in that most political of cities and in that most turbulent year. As his motorcade moved slowly down State Street, there was the usual escort of police cars and motorcycles, red, blue and white lights sparkling. Kennedy rode in an open car and just ahead of the car was a flat-bed truck with an immense array of floodlights aimed right at the candidate, so that even though it was daylight, he seemed to have a kind of theatrical glow. As I look back on that memory, and considering another procession in an open car in Dallas three years later; the parallel with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem takes on a chilling significance. Underneath the bright glory of the triumphal procession into Jerusalem there is a deep and insistent cadence, a throbbing drum-beat, the sure and certain knowledge that events are set in motion that cannot be stopped and can only lead to the dark hill of Calvary.

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was orchestrated as skillfully as any of the political events of our own time. He had an agenda to proclaim and the symbolism of his triumphant procession set it forth in terms that were unmistakable. Jesus chose this moment to claim his royal privilege and his divine destiny.

He wasn't in the habit of claiming privileges for himself. People called him "Master" and "Teacher" and even "Lord", but he preferred to cast himself as a servant. That was both his medium and his message and so it seemed entirely out of character when before he made that triumphal entry into the Holy City, he demanded a favor that would have been outrageous for any but the most arrogant of officialdom. Pausing outside of the city, he sent two of his followers into one of the outlying villages where they would find a donkey colt, never before ridden. He charged those messengers to commandeer the animal in an act that came precious close to stealing. If they were questioned, or in any way hindered, they were simply to say, "The Lord needs it."

When the question was asked, the messengers gave the prescribed answer and it seems to have been full and sufficient: "The Lord needs it."

I have wondered about that animal, that donkey. Who was its owner? After all the hubbub, did he ever get it back? Was the animal somehow changed by the experience? Such is the stuff of pious imagination.

A friend has given me a subscription to *Episcopal Life*, the monthly newspaper of the Episcopal Church. In the April edition there is an article about a new illustrated children's book, called *A Donkey's Easter Tale*. That's "Tale," spelled

T.A.L.E. (I wonder if the publishers gave any thought to the possibilities of there being some confusion between what and what was heard? The possibilities for Sunday Schools are immense!) The book supposes that the animal follows Jesus throughout the week and tells the story through the eyes of a donkey. That's not a bad idea, and it is connected to what I want to say this morning.

The donkey. The Lord has need of it. The animal, the servant-creature, and its holy purpose are part of Christ's own mission and message. It does not strain the lesson to say that what was true of that beast of burden is true for you and me: The Lord has need of it, and the Lord needs us. The privilege of his lordship is to commandeer our service. It is a new way of looking at how we spend our precious time. It calls for a re-examination of our priorities in life -- how we discriminate between what we actually need and what is only a preoccupation. It sharpens our sensibilities to the needs that are around us. If there is anything good to come out of hard times, it is that needs become obvious and in many people the wellsprings of generosity are opened. Consider the workers who surrender work hours so that co-workers may keep their jobs a little longer.

For those of us who are faced with what we are tempted to see as the uselessness of retirement or the loss of energy that comes with age, there is the good news that the lord has need of us too. I think of John Milton, the old Puritan poet who wrote the sonnet on his blindness. It ends with that memorable line, "They also serve who only stand and wait." It is the quality of our waiting that serves as a witness -- the serene acceptance of difficulties and limitations and the clear sense that the waiting is not idleness, and that in it God is glorified and Christ is served "Just as I Am."

Jesus, who was so remarkably modest about making any claim to majesty, even when they tried to thrust it upon him, now comes into the open and declares his privilege. The message is conveyed. The terms are clear and unmistakable: The prophet had written, "Behold, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt the foal of a donkey." (*Zech. 9:9*) The prophet has spoken, and the prophecy is fulfilled this day in your own sight and hearing.

Lordship, kingship, majesty -- all of them are images that our culture has difficulty comprehending, so committed we are to democratic equality. We have a hard time getting our heads around the idea that the Jesus who so consciously took the role of servant is the same Jesus who now assumes the mantle of divine majesty, even though riding a lowly beast of burden.

The ambiguity tends to separate Christians into camps: ones who wrap themselves in the envelope of religious majesty, holiness and mystery, and others who settle for a more human and understandable model of moral righteousness and social

justice. Jesus was demonstrating that holiness and righteousness are all of one piece. By making a divine use of what was humble and ordinary as an example of his own servanthood, Jesus confirmed that both are necessary and that there is a crucial connection between the order of heaven and the condition of the world.

The confession that Jesus Christ is “God from God, light from light, true God from true God” lies at the heart of our worship. That he comes into the Holy City riding a donkey lies at the heart of our service in his name.

There is a time in our life -- or at the end of it -- when some messenger of Christ will come to us and, grabbing us by the halter, tell us that the Lord needs us for some special task, some divine commission, that is ours alone. When that happens, go with the grace of that humble animal, confident in what we are told -- that the Lord needs us. Grant that divine privilege, confident that in having done so you will receive grace upon grace.

The challenge is not to make him triumphant. He has already achieved that. The challenge is to let him triumph in us, in our city, in our church.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna! Hosanna!